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AUTHOR Bard, Dana
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ABSTRACT

A study examined conversations of 10 "avid" female quilters from around the United States who communicate via e-mail. Results indicated that their conversations reveal ways in which they are using this modern technology in the construction of their feminine quilt artist identities. While most of the e-mail was devoted to the business of quilting (sharing techniques, books reviews, providing feedback on projects), a certain amount was devoted to subversive responses to the dominant culture--both the dominant art culture and the dominant male culture. The quilters' extra-literacy practices seem to have implications for the composition classroom. Findings suggest that these quilters appropriate literacy practices to express "domestic" concerns in much the same way that students in the composition classroom would appropriate them for academic concerns: having conversations to make knowledge; collaboration; and sharing the power. Perhaps educators can find a way to carry over the informal practice of literacy from the extra-academic milieu to the academy where particularly the student who is already marginalized could discover the appropriation of legitimacy and power in opposition to the majority discourse, thus transforming a "student who writes" into a "writer who happens to be a student." (Contains 8 references.) (CR)

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Dana Bard

CCCC, Chicago

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D. Bard

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Literacy Practices in Extra-Academic Conversations: Quilting Bees Via E-mail

Most women in our society do not have the opportunity to belong to an academic community; they are not students or professors. They may not even know what academic discourse is. Women who are no longer in an academic environment often have no opportunity to continue participation in such discourse and benefit from the validation for the serious work which such discourse is acknowledged to be. Traditionally women's interests and work have been discounted, and women's conversations about them have been denied the status of discourse. This response from the dominant culture did not silence women in the 19th century; Anne Gere studied one aspect of women's resistance to normative discourse in her essay *Literacy & Difference in 19th-Century Women's Clubs*, in which she wrote about the repression of women's clubs by ridicule and misrepresentation.

Though the gendered nature of the normative discourse of the dominant culture has ameliorated to some degree, its disparagement of "women's work" is still with us. An example of this traditional work is quilting in which there has been a resurgence of interest in the last two decades. These 20th-century quilters from around the world have joined guilds and various splinter groups to share their art. Many of these women who quilt today resist any discounting of their traditional work by forming groups in which they appropriate literacy practices for their own purposes. Many informal groups meet on-line. They are modern versions, on multiple levels, of the 19th-century practice of quilting bees.

The subject of this study is a group of ten avid female quilters from around the United States who communicate via e-mail. Their conversations reveal ways in which they are using this modern technology in the construction of their feminine quilt artist identities. It facilitates the

CS 216 446

creation of their own validating community and discourse in response to the dominant culture that often ridicules their interest and work in quilting. The demographics of this particular group are:

> **Ages:** 2 in their 20s, 1 in her 30s, 5 in their 40s, and 2 in their 50s
> **Quilting experience:** varying from 1 year to 20 years
> **Vocations:** 1 homemaker, a retired psychologist, a former editor for a nationally known publisher, 3 RNs,1 lawyer, 1 university instructor, 1 commercial illustrator, and 1 graduate student

Doubtless, most, if not all of us, here today use e-mail frequently to communicate with colleagues, students, and others. However, we may not consider how this technology and practice of literacy is being appropriated outside the venues of academia or business for uses in privatized leisure. Any familiarity with internet service providers would leave you unsurprised at the proliferation of forums, newsgroups, and chat rooms. Quilting is only one of many leisure activities that has found a niche on-line. There are many forums, live chats with experts, newsgroups, commercial and private web pages, and even virtual quilt exhibits available. E-mail groups are a natural part of this virtual community, and provide an ideal environment for communication about common concerns.

Women in the quilting world experience problems with discourse in relation to the misconceived gendered nature of this art or craft. One of those problems is with just that vocabulary: art or craft. Rozika Parker, in *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, says:

> When women embroider, it is seen not as art, but entirely as the expression of femininity. And ...is categorised as craft. The fine arts...are considered the proper sphere of the privileged classes while craft or the applied arts...are associated with the working class. However there is an important connection between the hierarchy of the arts and the sexual categories male/female. The development of an ideology of femininity coincided historically with the emergence of a clearly defined separation of art and craft...in the Renaissance at the time when embroidery was increasingly becoming the province of women amateurs, working for the home without pay. (5)

That which Parker implies for embroidery could be applied equally well to other types of needlework, such as quilting. The term 'craft' can be, and is, interpreted by many as pejorative; it

discounts the value of the work in that hierarchy of art. Quilting is seen as leisure-time play, not serious work having monetary value. This brings us to another problem with discourse: the meaning of "women's work." What is women's work? How is it valued, or more precisely, de-valued? For example, no matter how many platitudes are expressed about the value of the work done by women in the home, the reality is that our culture does not value it. We express value in monetary terms; these women do not receive consideration for the value of their labor in real dollars, in our tax code, or in our vocabulary. ("Just" a homemaker?) This de-valued perception of women's work spills over to our perceptions of their artistic expressions leading us to call their work 'craft' and all to often, to dismiss that work before any serious evaluation of it of been made. This leaves many quilters, like many homemakers, hesitant to proclaim their avocation publicly, fearful of the judgments which consign their very personal creative expressions (and therefore, themselves) to the proverbial charity bazaar along with Aunt Milly's crocheted tea cozies. Again, Rozika Parker quoting a professional woman's fears:

> I am a sociologist....I care about my work, but it is not part of me as are patchwork and embroidery. Should I try to make it so, is my sewing a clinging to a dependent, passive childhood, a female stereotype, or is it truly me? I was doing a patchwork cushion with embroidered details one day in the staff room and the Head of Department was entirely contemptuous. I soon learned never to tell people I embroider." (214)

E-mail provides a means of using literacy practices, at least in part, to reply to these ridiculing responses from the dominant culture. A quilter in the group under study confirmed this perception of a subservient position:

> We all have a tendency to relegate what we do with our quilting or stitchery as ordinary and mundane and even feel a little apologetic for having a very creative side to our personality....I started describing what I do as fabric manipulation or use the word fiber artist when I discuss what I do...I feel better about who I am if I'm a fiber artist and people take me more seriously. (10-8-97)

Another member reflects a similar perception of public attitudes but with a different response to them:

> In regards to people looking down on quilting. A resounding YES, but I think that it is because in this society, many people only place high value and bestow respect upon those things that make $$$$....If I started selling quilts for high sums, or if my work showed up on museum walls, I would get more respect from the art world, but many average people would still just consider it "a nice little hobby." Infuriating. (10-8-97)

While most of the e-mail was devoted to the business of quilting (sharing techniques, book reviews, providing feedback on various projects, and so on), a certain amount was devoted to subversive responses to the dominant culture—both the dominant art culture and the dominant male culture. Responses to the dominant art culture are evident in the validating support of one another's ideas and work; the comments were universally positive and encouraging. There seemed to be a reluctant acceptance of the discriminatory reality in the public marketplace but with an expectation of the overthrow of those dominant values of masculinized High Art. An example is the following comment:

> I know that my sister and brother-in-law who are both professional artists tend to view quilting very differently—my sister quilts and does some beautiful traditional work, but regards it more as a craft. My brother in law sees it as an art form. (10-8-97)

Conversely, the several comments about the dominant male culture were mostly expressed as humor with a biting edge; several 'male bashing' jokes were shared. An example is a three-part list: How Dogs Are Better Than Men, How Men Are Better Than Dogs, and How Dogs and Men Are the Same. Is it just coincidental that the dogs take precedence as the first list and the first subject of the last list, or is that biting edge veiling the Truth in humor? Yet responses to the dominant culture are not entirely directed toward men. Many comments were directed toward the women in our culture who support that dominant ideology of power and the binaries of man/woman, strong/weak, serious/frivolous, and so on. Fairly or not, Martha Stewart became the icon for those women. The humor is again sarcastic. An example is a list of "The Top Ten Signs You're Being Stalked by Martha Stewart", the number 1 sign is that "you awaken one morning with a glue gun pointed squarely at your temple." Perhaps the humor escapes you here, but the hostility is surely unmistakable. Is it troubling that this sort of hostility is exhibited toward the

Martha Stewart types but not toward men? Is this a function of not being able to excuse in women what one can excuse in the opposite sex who has been depicted as hopelessly inept? Or is it a case of turning the hostility towards a safe target rather than that dominant culture? Several times during the year apologies were made for forceful opinions that had been posted. It was typical to read that the sender had contemplated not sending the opinionated mail, and that she admitted to frequently deleting messages before they had been sent. Why the hesitancy to express a point of view? Is this really just social politeness, or are the habits of subordination so thoroughly inculcated that even among a small, mostly like-minded group of women there is fear to voice the Self? In *Bearing the Word*, Margaret Homans reviews Simone de Beauvoir, Jacques Lacan, biology and issues of historical domesticity to theorize that women use literal language while men use figurative language. Time does not allow a fair treatment of her work here but the following is pertinent:

> I will argue that the differential valuations of literal and figurative originate in the way our culture constructs masculinity and femininity, for if the literal is associated with the feminine, the more highly valued figurative is associated with the masculine. To take something literally is to get it wrong, while to have a figurative understanding of something is the correct intellectual stance. (26)

Are women so used to "getting it wrong" that we lack faith not only in our art but in our language—and thoughts—as well? If so, then using literacy practices as this group has done is not only a liberating step for ten artists, it is surely a step towards overcoming those differential valuations by transforming femininity through validation, much as has a contemporary feminist needlework artist quoted by Rozika Parker:

> Passivity and obedience...are the very opposites of the qualities necessary to make a sustained effort in needlework. What's required are physical and mental skills, fine aesthetic judgement in colour, texture and composition; patience during long training; and assertive individuality of design (and consequent disobedience of aesthetic convention). Quiet strength need not be mistaken for useless vulnerability. (207)

My study of just one year of a group of just ten women is certainly unscientific and too limited for me to draw any generally significant conclusions. I am left with interesting questions to

ponder. Yet their extra-academic literacy practices seem to have implications for the composition classroom. Obviously, in this day of wide-spread use of computer technology in privatized leisure, it would be trite to say that the composition classroom ought to include this techonology. In addition, it is not difficult to agree with Anne Gere that there is a "blurring of domestic and academic scenes...[which] suggest new ways of looking at the relation of public and private life" and that "thinking along these lines we would do well to recall Kenneth Burke's image of intellectual history as a parlor where participants enter and leave the ongoing conversation. This domestic/academic image resonates with feminist explorations of the trajectories of public and private" (*Kitchen Tables*, 87). These quilters appropriate literacy practices to express that which I hesitatingly call "domestic" concerns in much the same way that we hope students in the composition classroom would appropriate them for academic concerns: having conversations to make knowledge, collaboration, sharing the power. It would be logical to assume that this quilting group's use of literacy is not unique. Our students are undoubtedly doing likewise in their own privatized leisure. Therefore, doesn't this lead us to think of their competence and ability to construct appropriate composition 'products' in a different light? Rather than conceiving of them as students that need to be initiated into the practice of composition, should we not think of them as active participants in literacy and composition practices—on-going practices that pre- and post-date the students' academic years? Wouldn't our perception of their competence and ability in the broader world of extra-curricular literacy practices influence their self-perceptions and practices, and perhaps their ability to succeed in the academy?

Another implication for the composition classroom is suggested by Lester Faigley in *Fragments of Rationality*:

> Lyotard says that the advantage of a narrative is that it can combine different genres and authorizes a local *we* that delineates a sense of self. In telling their own stories, marginalized groups can gain local legitimacy and can oppose majority discourses. (218)

While what this group of quilters has been writing might not be defined as 'narrative,' certainly they were creating a "local *we*." The members had expressed feelings of marginality and had

playfully worked at appropriating legitimacy and opposing majority discourse. This is a valid and valuable use of literacy practices. Can we find a way to carry over the ready, informal practice of literacy from the extra-academic milieu to the academy where particularly the student who is already marginalized in our culture could discover, or continue, the appropriation of legitimacy and power in opposition to the majority discourse? Literacy could be transformed from an arbitrary practice mandated by the academy into a private and public practice integral to the self-construction of the student writer: a transformation from a 'student who writes' into a 'writer who happens to be a student.'

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